

IF YOU SURVIVED 7TH GRADE, YOU CAN BE AN ACTOR

Applying the Meisner Technique to Get
Outta Your Head in Acting and in Life

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For Beverly Z. Davis. Who saw me at age twenty-eight when I could not see my own self. Knowing I would never fit in, Bev made me realize I belonged, was part of, not separate from, and helped me lead from that space so I could eventually use that to create a clearing in others to do the same. I went from surviving to thriving. Because of Bev's belief in me, I took on my calling and purpose and created Matthew Corozine Studio (MCS)—a creative home for myself and other “black sheep” who needed to belong and not just fit in.

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INTRODUCTION

“For me, life is continuously being hungry. The meaning of life is not simply to exist, to survive, but to move ahead, to go up, to achieve, to conquer.”

- Arnold Schwarzenegger

If you're hungry for more out of life. If you long to be more self-expressive and crave a fuller artistic and creative existence. If you have trapped the artist inside you, avoided the creative voice in you, and are coming from a place of shame. If you are someone who needs to be seen and heard more than everyday life can offer a person working hard for love while hanging on to the myth, “if X happens...I will finally be happy,” you need to continue reading.

This book is for all kinds of actors—closeted actors, working actors, former actors, rehabilitated actors,

wannabe actors, and should've-been actors. It's for social actors—those special souls who have been acting their whole life while hiding their true selves behind a mask while desperately hoping to be liked, seen, and heard. Maybe you're that closeted creative genius, and every time you walk by a Broadway marquee or see the opening credits of a TV show, you know your name should be up there too, right where it belongs.

What kind of actor are you? All of us have more than one kind of actor living inside us.

Whatever the kind of actor that lives inside you, you're here for a reason. There's an area, probably somewhere in the realm of show business, where you feel you're experiencing lack. And you've likely felt the effects of this deficiency for a long time. Now, you've decided to face that thing, that need, head-on. You're taking your control back. You're on a mission to become the actor you've always wanted and always known you can be. You may be a teenager, your early twenties, or even an older senior citizen and feel like the career of acting is calling. Maybe you know nothing about acting technique, but you are keenly aware there is a trapped actor-creator-creative spirit within you. If that is the case, I'm excited for you, and I'm here for you.

Join me and learn about the craft of acting. Get coached from the page, discover how to connect to be the best you, and unearth the actor inside you. Oh, and you'll also get some skills to get out of your own way in everyday life. This book and work will meet you where you are. If you've

never taken an acting class or if you're a Broadway two-time Tony Award nominee who needs a push from good to great this book is for *you*.

And just to be a little more relatable, and so the focus isn't on you all the time (who wants that 24/7, am I right?), I'm going to offer you little snippets of my personal story within these pages. Not because I need to or am some attention-queen, but because these anecdotes will help get certain acting lessons across and may help you relate and feel less alone while on your acting journey.

Back in 2000, in New York City, when I was twenty-eight-years-old, I took all my anxiety, fear, depression, shame, and panic and learned to own it and use it. No longer were these liabilities but assets. I even turned them all into a superpower...vulnerability. This newfound self-accountability led me to explore and eliminate the secret I felt inside for a long time, that I wasn't okay as a person—and I built an acting studio from it.

THE BEGINNING

(A VERY GOOD PLACE TO START)

ACTING IS...

“Acting is living and behaving truthfully and fully under imaginary circumstances.”

- Sanford Meisner, adapted by Matt Corozine

THE OPPOSITE OF FANTASY IS REALITY. Most people have a limited belief system. This is a big reason why I love the Meisner work. You need to build imaginary circumstances and fantasy, but you have to pair it with being in the moment and dealing with whatever is happening truthfully. I work from this definition of acting—living truthfully and fully under imaginary circumstances. I make all my students memorize that in their first class. This is Sanford Meisner’s definition, but I added the word “fully.” Why? Because there’s a fullness in

allowing oneself to take part in a heightened reality that helps us break through areas we have neglected, hid from, or shut off. This heightened reality is essential in acting.

Everyone has an actor in them. A part of them that needs to be seen and heard and self-expressed that only has permission to do so in a heightened reality (what we call “the work” in imaginary circumstances). To get to the actor in us, we must unlearn the old story running the show of our life. We have to move past the old ways of needing constant control, our brains and lives on autopilot, and a self-limiting belief system to uncover the artist who has always been there. The Meisner Technique was eventually the key to the door that unlocked the artist in me that had been fighting to get out since childhood—and it can be for you too.

I first dabbled in this technique in undergrad at SUNY New Paltz and attacked it seriously in the late 1990s in New York City. When first starting out as an actor (several moons before I founded MCS), I had tons of acting teachers (or self-glorified critiquers as I now refer to them) who would say, “Matt, you’re in your head.” I would also hear things like, “Matt, you’re not in the moment,” or “we see you planning and working and anticipating outcomes. You’re working for results.” The worst was, “you’re not listening,” which is the kiss of death for an actor. Ouch. But nobody ever gave me tools or a technique to go beyond this. How the hell was I supposed to stop planning, get out of my head, and be in the moment?

I was stuck...like a used car that sometimes works, but really, there's no guarantee. Will the engine turn over? Will a young Matt deliver a good acting performance in class? Find out next on *Days of our Acting Lives*. I was truly struggling back in those days.

I liken my well-meaning acting coaches and teachers in my early twenties to a lifeguard telling a first-time swimmer, "Stop drowning! Can't you read the sign? It says *no drowning!* Stop it!" But how do I stop drowning? How would young Matt, and how can you stay in the moment?

The Meisner Technique was my lifeboat. I could focus on the technique rather than my life programing, my old story, and *trying* on my own through my own thinking. This did not work, and it never did. My best thinking got me to a place where I could not go further without a paradigm shift.

The Meisner Technique was that shift. It was the first time I felt okay not being okay. Growing up, I felt like I was one of the messier members of the human race, not unique or special, and definitely someone who didn't belong. I began telling myself the story that I wasn't male enough like the other boys and I was inadequate. The experiences and emotions I recognized in my body were those that aren't the most pleasant, won't win you a superlative at the end of high school, and caused me unnecessary shame. Raise your hand if you've ever felt...awkward, shy, embarrassed, insecure, vulnerable, scared, angry, rageful, and/or like an asshole. These were and are all legitimate parts of myself, but I wanted no part

of any of them, and I hated those parts of me. Thankfully, I found out through my Meisner training that these human parts of me needed to be included in every moment to be a good actor. To build this technique, I had to stop compartmentalizing, which was what I was doing since I was kid-Matt. I needed to start incorporating all the divided parts of me to be the artist I truly am.

Wait a second! All the stuff I hated about myself and hid was what I wanted and *needed*? Yes. It was the only way to have truth in my art and call myself an artist rather than a wind-up doll that “performed.”

So, how does someone become divided, unwilling to own the parts of themselves they feel are “icky?” Why would a person compartmentalize? For a lot of reasons, but to help you understand, I’ll briefly touch on why these were my experiences as a younger man.

I grew up in a born-again Christian family in the 1970s and 80s in Peekskill, New York (if you are my age or older, it was the same locale of the ol’ hit TV show, *The Facts of Life*). But I had a secret. My attraction to men. I was gay, and despite the anti-gay programming I received from all sides growing up, something inside me was okay with it. I knew it was considered wrong, and other people in my church and family did not feel a same-sex attraction like I did. So, I decided something had to be wrong with me. How could a butch-looking young man be so sensitive, effeminate, relate well to women, feel emotions strongly, and have such a keen sense of people lying and pretending and “acting” in life? Wrong, wrong, wrong. But I knew

what was “right,” which was a version of 1980s born-again Christianity that sprung from the sleepy American suburbs. And that twisted version of theology was also caked heavily in the terrible “S” word. Shame.

Shame can only thrive in secret, so I was the king of hiding. And kid-Matt had to cover it up by being the best, most special, most liked, most wanted, and most attractive. I had to have it all together and not need help. I needed to always portray a perfect version of myself and get out of situations quickly before people found out the real me. Shame cannot have connection, authenticity, and vulnerability—which are all the things necessary for relationships to thrive. So, I split. I hid parts of myself and committed to a “life of acting.” Acting as if I was doing well all the time (of course, I wasn’t). If my outer façade ever cracked (it did), I would panic and hide and start the shame-cycle all over again.

Fortunately, I survived and learned (more on all that later) and grew and found that the Meisner Technique could free me as an actor. But I also found that it could help me grow as a person.

You can do this too! Hell, if you survived 7th-grade, you can be an actor. We all had to split on some level to survive 7th grade. To be the best actor you can be, you must connect to all the divided parts of yourself. Yes, you needed to split them off to survive childhood, but you’re no longer in survival mode. It’s time to thrive in life and as an actor

Church. Family. Government. School. None of these gave me the truth of me.

It was the Meisner work in the famous studios at Carnegie Hall that did for me.

So, let's go back in time...and get the story that was written in me and all of us. Let's write a new story for you and craft a new present life that can take you into the future you want to create.

This is what I do with all my students who walk into MCS and begin this work.